THE IDEA

The word refinement occurs in the novels of Henry James with such an emphatic frequency as to invite its application as an organic metaphor controlling and illuminating the writer's art and vision of life. The word and the idea it embodies are never given an explicit definition in the novels, but James continuously places before the reader situations, actions and characters, in whose complex reality refinement achieves its dramatic projection. Refinement in the Jamesian universe reveals itself fundamentally as that element in human nature and in the structure of society, which involves the human self in the possibility and the fact of change and of human growth and transformation.

The total output of James's fiction can be meaningfully interpreted as a continuous tracing out of the idea of refinement. The major themes of James's novels and the major phases of his artistic development readily organise themselves into a single frame-work of critical analysis provided by the concept of refinement. The international theme, that of the collision of two cultures, one embodied in American innocence, and the other in European experience, emerges as a parable of human refinement, in which the human personality is liberated into the wider freedom of a universal life. The theme of the pilgrim in search of society, and that of the artist in search of truth are similarly elaborated as illustrations of human refinement attained through a transcendence of limited consciousness.

Starting with vague surmises and uncertain formulations of the ideal of refinement, Henry James arrived at his first major discovery of the relationship between the self and the society as a projection of refinement in *The Portrait of a Lady,* which was the culminating point of his first phase. Isabel Archer's inclusive view of life demands the exclusion of her self hoed, and James endows upon refinement an

identity and kinship with the values of detachment, renunciation, acceptance and affirmation. In the middle period of his career, James was continuously trying out the cultural and social inflections of human refinement, but the paradoxical nature and quality of the idea continued to tease him. In the novels of this period, Henry James was preoccupied with the problem of evil and, accordingly, refinement is dramatised in terms of complex cultures and individual Behaviour which are not a<?ces$u>Ie to the impact and influence of